

Narcissists Inc.

An employee with a big ego can come at a high cost.

By Michael Farnsworth and V. John Ella

Companies don't need to put up with ruthless, mean or narcissistic people in top positions just because those people drive results. In fact, placing narcissists in high places could actually be harmful to your business. Because once they're in, removing them can be difficult.

People with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) may account for a disproportionate amount of employment-related lawsuits, and research suggests that plaintiffs with NPD may litigate longer and more persistently than others.

A 2008 epidemiological survey of tens of thousands of U.S. adults found that the overall prevalence of lifetime NPD was 6.2 percent, with rates greater for men (7.7 percent) than for women (4.8 percent). Many of these people are employed, and they bring morale down as their egos swell.

Like all personality disorders, NPD is a deeply ingrained and enduring behavioral pattern, manifesting as an inflexible response to a broad range of personal and social situations. Individuals with NPD are often incapable of viewing themselves as being wrong in any situation because they lack the ability to perceive their own faults and shortcomings.

Narcissism is a spectrum trait, ranging from mild self-centeredness to severe maladaptive characteristics that lead to constant conflict. Many individuals with narcissistic traits, and even full-blown NPD, climb high up the corporate ladder in their careers.

They may come across as self-absorbed, imperious and quick to take personal offense in neutral situations. They also tend to be insensitive to the needs of superiors and subordinates,

have high opinions of their own "specialness," and rage in the face of setbacks. Sound like anyone you know?

Narcissistic Employees

Because employees with NPD are quick to take offense at criticism, even when it is fair, they are often spoiling for a fight—which in some cases takes

compound the problem, causing significant frustration for the HR professionals tasked with dealing with these employees.

Unfortunately, counseling from HR or supervisors is unlikely to help in most cases. Typically, the employee's intransigent and inflexible attitude will eventually lead to termination of employment.



the form of litigation and in other cases may even lead to violence. They just can't fathom that they could be wrong and will become obsessed with seeking retribution. Their behavior is often self-defeating as well, as they can lose sight of the big picture of how their actions could affect their long-term reputation or career.

Other common traits of NPD, such as paranoia and sociopathy, are apt to

Narcissistic Plaintiffs

A plaintiff-employee who believes that he or she is right and the rest of the world is wrong can pose a difficult problem for the defendant-employer. Even though so-called at-will employment is generally recognized in the United States—allowing employers to discharge employees at any time, even without cause—many exceptions can apply.

Terminated employees, for

example, often can find a plausible legal theory on which to base their complaint if they want to pursue their grievance in a court. This could include discrimination—since virtually everyone is a member of at least one protected class—and defamation, along with contractual claims such as tortious interference (the intentional interference with a contract).

A terminated employee may be able to convince an attorney to take the case on a contingency basis, or he or she may pursue a case “pro se,” or without an attorney. Due to their skewed judgment, people with NPD will often fail to recognize when a case has questionable merit and ignore the cost of litigation.

In fact, we’ve seen cases where plaintiffs diagnosed with NPD have spent their life savings only to have their administrative charge dismissed, their

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lawsuit let go by a trial court judge, and the decision affirmed by the court of appeals.

Employers and insurance companies that seek to resolve a case with this type of plaintiff may offer a significant amount of money to settle meritless claims. Often, however, plaintiffs with NPD refuse these offers as they expect to be vindicated in court. They are fully confident that a judge

will declare them absolutely correct in everything they have asserted.

And, just as paranoid people sometimes have actual enemies, plaintiffs with NPD can have legitimate legal claims. Only the court system can determine that. Don’t expect these folks to be amenable to alternative dispute resolution or mediation. Their



candidates with NPD, but conduct the tests carefully as their use may lead to claims of discrimination.

Being a high-performing leader involves more than just being able to drive deals or crunch numbers. Hiring based on business results alone could backfire, so take

Diagnosing NPD

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition: DSM-5*, a person must have at least five of the following traits to be diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder:

- A grandiose sense of self-importance.
- A preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love.
- The belief that he or she is “special” and unique and can be understood only

by other special or high-status people.

- The need for excessive admiration.
- A sense of entitlement—unreasonable expectations of favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations.
- The tendency to exploit others to achieve his or her own ends.
- A lack of empathy.
- Envy of others or the belief that others are envious of him or her.
- Arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

claims will likely need to be decided by a judge or jury, often after significant expense.

Three Takeaways

So, what can HR professionals do to discipline or discharge workers with NPD—or to avoid hiring them in the first place? Keep in mind the following:

- Employees with narcissistic personality disorder can be very distracting and even destructive. Keep them in check.
- Don’t waste time trying to settle a lawsuit once you realize you have someone with NPD on your hands. Litigate away!
- Personality tests can screen out

the whole person into account when filling your top slots. ■



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